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ABSTRACT

Black studies, hence relevant education for black people in this country, have been omitted from educational curricula at all levels. Some reasons are: questions of moral responsibility involved in complying with public pressure for curriculum reforms; doubt that the experiences of black people justify study; general ignorance of Afro-American experience; and, society's disagreement over the purpose of education. There have been various theoretical models for curriculum development --the transmission of culture, socialization, transformation of society. None of these reflects the multi-ethnic nature of our people. The majority of people of African ancestry in America have had a sufficiently different culture and lifestyle to necessitate inclusion of black studies. The broad purpose of black studies must be to help black people cope with the white world without making them completely alienated from it or subservient to it. Contemporary society, as it applies to black people in this country, could be one of the basic operational referents of the curriculum; the other might be black heritage, including African educational heritage. (JLB)

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BLACK STUDIES
A NEW ARENA OF INSTRUCTION [1]

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During 1969 the subject of black or Afro-American studies was highly publicized and debated with considerable vigor. Critics and advocates from almost every academic discipline within the university and from almost every occupation outside of higher education voiced their opinions. As one who has been intimately involved with efforts to design black studies curricula, I had a somewhat quivering reaction to the word "arena" in the title of this address. I think, however, it was the word "new" that created a more pronounced reaction for me. We might better have said "an omitted area of instruction" or "an overlooked area of instruction" or a "denied area of instruction". Only in the sense that it has not generally been included in the nation's curriculum can we say that black studies is new.

I should also make it clear at the beginning that the opinions or actions of any one individual cannot be construed as representing the thinking or action of the entire ethnic group involved. Instead I offer a personal impression of the significance and importance of black studies as an area of instruction and some suggestions for a theoretical and operational model.

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Educators and administrators usually have two questions. First, they want to know what the ferment over black studies is all about, and second, they want to know how to respond to this ferment. The first question in many ways reflects the very nature of the issues and problems connected with black studies. Certainly, educators and administrators must realize that our educational system has failed in the most fundamental ways to provide learning experiences that are relevant to blacks. They must also realize that the root cause of this failure is racism, the type of racism--conscious or unconscious--which dictates not only the choice of materials to be presented, and the way they are presented, but also the way black students' problems are perceived and dealt with by teachers and administrators. It is these fundamental problems and the urgent necessity for correcting them that have aroused the ferment.

It should come as a surprise to no one that black people are simply applying the lesson that there is no substitute for self-sufficiency. What we are trying to do is simply to seek a means whereby black people can provide for themselves a position of security in social and academic affairs and to preserve our own intellectual integrity in the midst of an often smug and condescending white majority.

There has been considerable resistance in educational circles to black studies programs. This resistance stems from two major concerns. First, many educators question the moral responsibility involved in complying with public pressures for curriculum reforms. They worry less they might be deserting their obligation to maintain high standards of excellance in curriculum offerings by responding favorably to insistent protest from local groups. Second, many educators seriously question the assertion that the experiences of

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black people in Africa and in the United States is a subject of sufficient amplitude and depth to justify general study and instruction on all educational levels. This is a point which I will return to later in the address.

The rhetoric of almost all such reservations is phrased in intellectual terms with questions about matters of academic responsibility or the intellectual defensibility of using black issues and themes as a basis for instruction rather than granting the possibility that there are things worth teaching of which even most academicians may be unaware. It would seem to me that the unwillingness to admit that even educators may be ill-informed about vitally important issues is symptomatic of the many problems of educational institutions in contemporary America.

Undoubtedly, much of the hesitancy with which educators have met demands for the inclusion of such materials in their curriculum offerings arises from ignorance of the Afro-American experience. Bethune of Columbia University has pointed out the "the Afro-American experience really needs no more justification for study than the simplest one: it is a study of man". A variety of groups, a number of individuals and several national reports have continued to point out that there are at least two Americas--one black and one white. These two Americas have been existing for centuries in a morally unacceptable relationship to one another. Whereas they coexist in what may be politically defined as one nation and despite many common institutions which they are required to share, the majority of the people of African ancestry living in America have and have had a significantly different culture and lifestyle from that of the mainstream America. We perceive our history in America differently from the way in which white America has largely portrayed and

misperceived that history. The Afro-American experience is a profoundly unique experience. In May of 1969 the American Council on Education sent its member institutions a special report on the increasingly controversial subject of "Black Studies Programs and Civil Rights". In the report it was conceded that black studies and Afro-American studies, or a term like the black perspective are understood variously. It is quite clear that white society and many white scholars do not seem to understand either the uniqueness, the diversity, or the meaning of the black experience. It is, in fact, this diversity which makes an encompassing operational definition of Afro-American studies difficult to achieve.

Enlightened Americans understand that our institutions, our social status, our lifestyle and our aspirations are basically marked by adaptation of our indigenous cultural patterns to slavery and to terrible and continuing ordeals of European racism and power. The reality that we have survived and in this survival have created and contributed in the richest sense to the sum of human culture is, as Martin Luther King said -- a miracle, a thing of pride, enabling us to endure. All people should be given the opportunity to know of his unfolding odessy and the fact that at this stage a demand must be made to include it among the corpus of knowledge to be passed on represents a tragedy for us and a degradation for those who have made this demand necessary. As Bethune points out,

> "just as the white American experience is incomplete and incomprehensible if the history of Europe were to be isolated from it, so also the black-American experience is incomplete and incomprehensible without the history of Africa. If the history of the Afro-American is distorted and hidden, then the whole world is short-changed and the record of humanity diminished."

Thus far, I have presented an ideological base for the inclusion of black studies in the curriculum at all levels. That black studies are important for black and white students I would hope, is beyond doubt by now. Of much greater importance is the necessity to develop operational models so that we might provide sound educational programs which have lasting qualities.

BLACK STUDIES AND CURRICULUM THEORY

Curriculum theorists have often pointed out that society's concept of the function of the school determines to a great extent what kind of curriculum the schools will have. Yet in a pluristic society, it is difficult to establish a single function for any agency. In a democratic society these formulations are further complicated by the fact that the different layers of society are supposed to participate in the process of determining what education should be and do. It is quite clear today that society has by no means agreed about what the central function of the school should be. It is precisely this point that is important with regard to black studies. For example, one theory stresses the preserving function of education; that is, the preserving of the cultural heritage, especially the western culture. This transmission of culture means man's capacity to learn, to organize learning in symbolic forms, to communicate this learning as knowledge to other members of the species. Culture includes not only the accumulated knowledge in every field of inquiry, but also the values, beliefs, and norms which have been passed down with frequent modifications throughout the history of that society. This concept of the function of the

school is inadequate so far as black children are concerned and therefore any curriculum based on this theory is unacceptable.

An opposing view held by many educators and social analysts is that education is an instrument for transforming culture. The idea that education has a constructive role to play in shaping the society has deep roots in American tradition and is articulated in much of educational writing and philosophy. Horace Mann underscored the relationship between popular education and social problems. The main thesis of Dewey and his followers was that the school was not merely a residual institution to maintain things as they are: Dewey saw the function of the school in both psychological and social terms. The role of education in such a society was to inculcate the habits that would make it possible for individuals to control their surroundings rather than submit to them and this is precisely what black groups are demanding.

Although these arguments were largely semantic, they have had concrete implications for the shape of educational programs, especially the curriculum. The irony is that they have provided a theoretical basis for a curriculum that educators never really intended to implement. Whether the role of education has been viewed as that of transmitting culture, socializing the individual, or recontructing society, we have never really had a curriculum that adequately reflected the multi-ethnic nature of our people. And it has become increasingly clear that much of the controversy over black studies is based on a continuation of efforts to rely on the same theories.

Fortunately, there are potent forces in movement today to change the focus of curriculum to accomodate the special nature of other ethnic groups. It is interesting to note that the main thrust toward these curriculum revisions has taken place mostly outside the traditional mold--in street academies, community centers, and demonstrations projects within institutions of higher education. These facts are a clear indication of the direction we should take. It seems to me that the only way we are going to reach a substantial number of young black Americans in our schools is to devise a form of education which helps people cope with the white world without making them either completely alienated from it or subservient to it. If black studies programs are to be developed, they must be based on a theory that has the preceding assertion as a referent.

Contemporary Society and the Black Experience as a Referent

Earlier I used the term "relevance when I suggested that our educational system has failed to provide a relevant education for blacks. Although the question of what is relevant is always mediated by ideology and experience, I think it is appropriate to provide a definition. In education the term implies that what is to be learned is perceived by the learner as having meaning in his present life and the expectation that it will have utility in future learning or coping situations. A meaningful relevant education, therefore, includes the skills necessary for one to cope with life. The definition of relevance provides us with a starting point around which to develop our theoretical and operational definitions of black studies. I also said earlier that

educators often question whether the experience of black people in Africa and America is a subject of sufficient depth to justify study and instruction. The referents which follow provide at least a partial answer to this question.

The basic referent for making curriculum decisions with regard to black studies should be contemporary society, its institutions and social processes as they apply to the experience of black people in this nation. More specifically, courses and programs that focus on black content and deal specifically with the black experience--in contemporary society. For example, areas of sociology, psychology, government politics, art and music might be represented here. I do not exclude the exact sciences such as mathematics and physics. Few courses in the sciences currently use materials that are relevant to black Americans or emphasize problems. These are the problems that deal with every day existence. They are interdisciplinary in that they involve technology as well as social issues. And they present enormous difficulties for large low income minority groups.

This referent should also include another set of courses and programs that focus on white identity problems. That is, there should be courses that focus on and identify and probe the cultural values of white America, particularly those that are based on underlying assumptions of white supremacy.

Black Heritage as a Referent

A second referent on which we can build our theory for a curriculum of black studies has to do with the individual and black heritage. It is this relationship to Africa that provides us with not simply heritage in the general sense but what I refer to as the educational heritage of the black American.

Of all the continents and peoples in the world, Africa and the African are the most written about and the least understood. For many years it was generally assumed, even among the most well-educated persons in the West, that the continent of Africa and its people had no history. In his book, "The Progress and Evaluation of Man in Africa", Dr. L.S.B. Leakey states,

> "in every country that one visits and where one is drawn into a conversation about Africa, the question is regularly asked, 'but what has Africa contributed to world progress'? These critics of Africa forget that men of science today, with a few exceptions, are satisfied that Africa was the birthplace of Man himself. And that for many hundreds of years thereafter Africa was in the forefront of all world progress".

Of the great independent West African nations, Old Ghana, Mali and Songhai are the most important. Old Ghana was the first of three kingdoms that became known to Europeans in the 8th century though it was probably a powerful kingdom long before that time. The kingdom, and later empire of Songhai was the last of the great independent black states in Western Africa before the coming of the slave trade. The invasion of this state in 1591 by Moroccan armies and the subsequent decline of its structure was the underlying basis of the deterioration of Western Africa that set in motion the period of internal strife that made the slave trade possible. Let is suffice for now to say that these great African states declined after bringing into being one civilization after another for a period of over one thousand years. Most of the states in this region lasted longer than the Roman empire and other better known states of Europe.

If we define education as the evolution and transmittal of culture, in principal, African societies have a tradition of education

which has borne and disseminated their respective cultures to modern times. Africa the continent has engendered educational institutions ranging from the ubiquitous family to the university. Some areas enjoyed the long-term transition from the former to the latter; others only recently plunged from the family or clan to the university.

The city of Timbuctoo in the Songhai kingdom in the 15th century was built into a place that established a fabulous reputation as a center of learning. At the University of Sankore famous scholars from North Africa and Europe exchanged visits with the scholars of Timbuctoo. When the European first arrived in the present-day northern regions of Nigeria, he was surprised to discover an entrenched scholarly tradition among the intellectuals in that area.

The University was a marvel not only in Africa but throughout the world which knew of it. It predated numerous European institutions which have come to be recognized as the foundations of the university tradition in the Western world. At the time the Islamic world was not experiencing that intellectual dormancy with which it is so frequently related today and the University flourished as a seat of learning, not only of Islamic law and tradition, but of literature and science as well. This University named after the mosque of that name was noteworthy for the fact that operations were performed there for the removal of cataracts. Arab historians have recorded that operations were performed in Timbuctoo that were not attempted in Europe until 200 years later. The Songhai had flourishing universities, a brilliant intellectual life, a vast

empire and surplus wealth. Their empire stretched from the rain forest to the south far into the Sahara in the north and from the Hausa states in the east to the Atlantic in the west--an area as large as the continent of Europe.

I mention these things to point out that the splendor of the early west African empires was not always a mystery to the European world. African rulers had presided over stable kingdoms containing universities famous as great centers of learning. Some of these kingdoms had discovered the art of metal working as early as 300 B.C. Great markets had been developed of such importance that their place had been entered on maps by chartographers anxious to pinpoint the source of wealth in the land of Blacks.

Now the wheel has come full circle and the ever-increasing importance of the future role of Africa and its relationship to black America has focused attention on the importance of her past. Archeological research has uncovered evidence of the existence of superior civilizations such as Mali and Ghana. Young Africans themselves are engaged in assembling proof of the greatness of the African past.

It is now entirely possible that the information about the African background, which was once known only to dedicated and devoted scholars of the subject, will eventually be available to every school child. It is now entirely possible to build a curriculum based, at least in part, on the rich foundations of the past of black people. We need make no excuses for the inclusion of black studies in our curriculum because it is indeed a part of man's beginning. Critics, to be sure, question whether the research base that

now exists is sufficiently broad to justify extended study, or even whether the area offers enough substance to merit consideration as a separate discipline. These critics forget the efforts of the early scholars of Afro-American studies such as Carter C. Woodson and they overlook the possibility that modern day academicians may be equally as gifted and concerned with systematic study and research of the black man.

In summary, I have argued for the inclusion of black studies in the nation's curriculum. I have suggested that many of the arguments raised by critics of black studies programs may be an effort to continue basing curriculum studies on theoretical notions that were never intended to be carried out. Moreover, I have implied that white society and indeed many white scholars do not understand either the uniqueness or the significance of the black experience as a part of what children learn in school. It is my contention that we must devise a form of education that helps black people cope with the white world without making them completely alienated from it or subserviant to it.

To this end, there are at least two referents possible in making curriculum decisions regarding black studies. The first is based on contemporary society, its institutions, its social processes as they apply to the experiences of black people in this nation. The second referent is based on the heritage of black people, or the relationship between Africa and black America and specifically, the educational heritage of black people.

It is not my intention, however, to overlook the many problems involved in the organization of black studies programs. I note with concern, for example, the disbanding of the black studies

department at the University of California at Riverside. It is true that in many universities a combination of several factors has created a difficult environment in which program development could proceed. Among these was the need to implement programs almost immediately which allowed little time for adequate planning. Political problems and the controversial question of the ideology of black studies programs added to the confusion. And there is always the practical task of securing staff and operating funds. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that colleges and universities will continue their efforts to establish black studies curricula and courses. As a part of this optimism, it is important for those of us in education to deal specifically with the substantive elements of Afro-American studies.

At the beginning of the speech I suggested that administrators also want to know how to respond to the ferment over black studies. As educators you represent financial power, community influence and social prestige. If your function of equipping students to cope successfully with reality is to be fulfilled, then you must also be responsible to the legitimate needs of the communities you supposedly serve. What black parents and students are asking on all levels, primary, secondary and universities, is for you to provide information and training that is relevant to the realities of which we all must live and to the truth about the history and heritage of black people. Black children must be given a better chance to solve the difficult problems of "who am I?","what is my place in the world?" and "how do I fit in?" It is unfortunate that many educators continue to wonder whether they should respond favorably to the demands from blacks for curriculum reform and some even question the validity and rigor of any curriculum that would be developed in response to protest.

Most students, whether in college, secondary or elementary school will benfit from black studies. Far from restricting black students to the study of their culture alone, and hence further crippling them in acquiring the skills needed to overcome handicaps in a technological society--the major motivation of black studies is to entice black students, previously conditioned to exclusion, to a greater involvement in the educational process. Black studies is, above all, a pedagogical device. The intention of black studies programs is to solve the problem of the black shortage in technical and scientific fields, not to aggravate it. This is probably one of the main reasons our efforts meet with resistance. In the final analysis, black studies programs provide an extension of the fight for the rights and privileges and the recognition by mankind that this is a multi-ethnic world. And it is indeed a proper place for this extension to take place in our educational institutions.

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